



Michael and Lindy Dean
Terra Preta Farm
Vincent, Alabama

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Location: Vincent, Alabama
Interviewer: Eric Velasco
Transcription: Diana Dombrowski
Length: One hour and thirty four minutes
Project: Highlands Bar and Grill at Work

[*START INTERVIEW*]

[00:00:02.07]

Eric V.: This is Eric Velasco for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm conducting an oral history interview about Highlands Bar and Grill with farmers Michael and Lindy Dean. They regularly supply salad greens, eggplant, root vegetables, herbs, and other seasonal produce to Highlands and Frank Stitt's other restaurant, Chez Fonfon, and Bottega restaurant and café. Michael was a waiter at Bottega with a yearning to farm, and Stitt helped him get started. It is January 26, 2019. We're on the Deans' farm in Shelby County, about thirty miles southeast of Highlands Bar & Grill. Michael, please introduce yourself, spell your name, and give your date of birth for the record.

[00:00:42.25]

Michael D.: Hello. My name is Michael Dean, M-i-c-h-a-e-l and my birthdate is May 22, 1970.

[00:00:54.02]

Eric V.: Lindy, would you do the same, please?

[00:00:55.01]

Lindy D.: Lindy Dean, L-i-n-d-y. My birthday is April 15, 1978.

[00:01:05.04]

Eric V.: Now, would you please tell us the name of your farm, spell its name, and give us its date of birth?

[00:01:12.18]

Michael D.: It's called Terra Preta Farm, T-e-r-r-a P-r-e-t-a F-a-r-m. I suppose its formal date of birth is about ten years ago. Although we've been doing this for twenty years, we've been through several name changes, and . . . we ended up with Terra Preta Farm.

[00:01:38.28]

Eric V.: So, tell me about your current relationship with Highlands and the other Stitt restaurants. How often do you deliver, what do you tend to bring?

[00:01:45.12]

Michael D.: We deliver six days a week, not necessarily every day to each of those restaurants. I started about twenty years ago working with Frank at one of his restaurants. There really was no local food scene at that point in time, and he was very interested in being able to acquire local produce. He had a friend that lived out where I lived, in Leeds, Alabama—Prince and Alecia Warnock—and they had some property. He had asked several of the employees if they were interested in growing some food on the side, just to see how that would work out. I lived next to—or close to—the Warnocks, and one day had just gone over to meet these people. They totally welcomed me into their house, their land, and they're some of our better friends to this day, although we don't farm on their property anymore. They also make a tomato chutney that Frank uses at one of his properties.

[00:02:52.19]

Eric V.: That's Alecia's?

[00:02:53.09]

Michael D.: Alecia's tomato chutney. And their children, Jodie and P.J., are some of our better friends as well, too. From that, I worked at both the restaurant and out at the Warnock's place, growing food for 'em.

[00:03:12.13]

Eric V.: I'm sorry, which restaurant?

[00:03:12.13]

Michael D.: Oh, at Bottega Café, alternating between the fine dining side and the café side.

[Coughs] Did that for about four or five years until I was making enough money where I could just quit the waiting and concentrating on just growing vegetables. My father had some property that had a few empty parking lots on it, and kind of where we got the idea to start doing raised beds, and turning a previously unusable piece of land into an urban farm, really. We started that, did that for about five years. Lindy had—we had met through mutual friends—and had come out and done some volunteer work with us. We met and grew closer, we decided that we would become partners in this. Eventually, we ended up to save enough money after a few years to buy a piece of property and make our own house and farm out here in Vincent, Alabama.

[00:04:21.05]

Eric V.: Where was your dad's property?

[00:04:21.05]

Michael D.: It was in Leeds. [Interviewer's note: Leeds is a city about 35 miles east of Birmingham, off Interstate 20.] It was kinda close to the Warnocks', too. I had lived in some rental property of his.

[00:04:29.05]

Eric V.: So, did you start with your dad's lots and then move to the Warnocks'?

[00:04:31.26]

Michael D.: No, we started at the Warnocks' for several years. I didn't know if this was going to be a viable career option, and it looked like it was; it was a niche market there was absolutely nobody in at the time, besides probably the farmers at Finley Market. But they weren't delivering, they would just, you go down to Finley and hook up with the watermelon man or the bean man. But no one was doing the specialty produce at all. [The Finley market is the Alabama Farmers Market, operated by the Jefferson County Truck Growers Association farmers market off Finley Avenue in north Birmingham. It is open every day.]

[00:04:59.02]

Eric V.: This is the early [19]90s, right? You started at Bottega around [19]93?

[00:05:02.21]

Michael D.: Yes. And worked there for about five or six years. The last few years, I was doing both, working as a farm and doing the waiting at night.

[00:05:15.19]

Eric V.: Now, most of the produce that was being grown in-state that was being served at Highlands going back to [19]82 and Bottega just in the years after it opened, where was it coming from?

[00:05:26.23]

Michael D.: You know, I couldn't tell you that. I don't know that a lot of people could tell you that. It was coming from the region, of course, but it was . . . a big commodity broker that was selling these things, probably from California, probably from Arizona, Mexico. And certain, a few things, I'm sure, tomatoes from Florida in-season. But nothing as close as thirty miles away.

[00:05:53.29]

Eric V.: And that's part of what I'm trying to get at. At the time, there were not personal relationships with farmers. About as close as you would get would be the truckers trucking up to the Jefferson County truck [market].

[00:06:04.18]

Michael D.: Exactly. And Frank and Foster are a couple of those. I mention the watermelon man, I cannot think of his name, but I think that kind of put a seed in his brain that, "Hey, you can meet the farmer and you can have them tailor some of what they grow for you specifically." And give an opportunity to farmers to grow something.

[00:06:25.08]

Eric V.: What got you interested in it?

[00:06:26.24]

Michael D.: [Laughter] Well, I had always worked outdoor. That's what I love doing. I loved being outdoors. Even in college, I had a small garden plot. Who in college has a small garden plot in their rental property?

[00:06:43.10]

Eric V.: Especially since you were a city boy, weren't you?

[00:06:45.08]

Michael D.: Well, if you consider . . . the outskirt suburbs of Birmingham a city boy, yeah, I suppose so.

[00:06:52.17]

Eric V.: But not one, a bunch of your neighbors were growing vegetables in a garden or anything? Right.

[00:06:58.08]

Michael D.: No. My parents had their backdoor garden where we'd grow okra, squash, tomatoes. I'd go get worms and go fishing down at the pond when I was a small kid at that the end of the dirt road. That's kinda country.

[00:07:13.15]

Eric V.: Yeah. How much land did they have?

[00:07:16.08]

Michael D.: Oh, it was a suburb. A little quarter-acre lot.

[00:07:19.09]

Eric V.: Okay.

[00:07:20.25]

Michael D.: It just happened to be at the end of a dirt road. Back then, you could walk around on other peoples' property and not feel like you're gonna get shot, and go use their lake as a nine-year-old boy and cast your fishing line in and go fish in their pond.

[00:07:37.08]

Eric V.: Well, what was it about farming that appealed to you? Did you have farmers among relatives, or . . . ?

[00:07:43.15]

Michael D.: No. Really just being outdoor, being your own person kinda thing. I've also been a big environmentalist since I was a kid. It was a way to tie that in to a career option.

[00:07:58.06]

Eric V.: What's the tie-in for you?

[00:08:00.00]

Michael D.: For now, there's being respectful of the land, making food that is not reliant on pesticides and fertilizers—chemical fertilizers, that is—and, most recently, being able to try to contribute to the global warming crisis and reducing our impact on the environment.

[00:08:24.29]

Eric V.: Now, you personally deliver your food to your customers.

[00:08:28.13]

Michael D.: Yes.

[00:08:28.18]

Eric V.: Why?

[00:08:30.14]

Michael D.: Stay in contact with the chefs. Know what they want—I get cooking hints, 'cause I'm not a professional chef. It's not that far of a drive, and really, it's just to stay in contact and meet new people.

[00:08:47.15]

Eric V.: Now, how do you . . . make the connection on what you need to grow? How do you find out what to plant?

[00:08:56.26]

Michael D.: A lot of times, it's a back-and-forth. They will tell me things that they would like to grow, and oftentimes, Lindy and I will—as we peruse through seed catalogs, find out over the years what does well, what tastes best. We make suggestions of them, and they are reliant on what we grow and our opinions on what would work well and what would taste well. Then, like I said, they oftentimes have a . . . something that they wanted to try that we will try for 'em.

[00:09:25.08]

Eric V.: And in terms of Chef Stitt, when did these conversations take place?

[00:09:33.02]

Michael D.: We see each other quite often; once or twice a month. I see Pardis, as well. Now that we have mutual friends, our bee mentor is a good friend, Ben Johnson. Prince and Alecia Warnock are good friends, and there'll be parties, dinners, or whatever, we'll run into each other. It just happens to be what we talk about when we see each other.

[00:09:57.18]

Eric V.: Does he ever come out to the farm?

[00:09:59.08]

Michael D.: He hasn't been out here yet. We've been out to his place, which is only about ten miles away, several times. We've helped with his bees, some, too. [Interviewer's note: He is referring to Paradise Farm, which Frank and Pardis Stitt purchased in the mid-2000s. They grow vegetables and herbs for the restaurants at Paradise Farm, and its hens supply some of the eggs the restaurants need.]

[00:10:08.20]

Eric V.: Now, what all do you grow—I'm sorry, go ahead, Lindy?

[00:10:12.12]

Lindy D.: Well, he used to come out more frequently in the beginning, like before we were established. He came out more frequently. He's not been out to our newest location, but in the beginnings of the relationship, he did frequent to see what was going on.

[00:10:31.15]

Eric V.: Why do you think that was? What do you think he was looking for?

[00:10:34.00]

Lindy D.: I think he was curious. I think he wanted to see how things were grown and how it was done.

[00:10:42.14]

Eric V.: 'Cause he'd only started Paradise Farm, or bought Paradise Farm, what, about ten, twelve years ago, right?

[00:10:47.08]

Lindy D.: I believe so.

[00:10:47.08]

Michael D.: Yeah, I'm not quite sure.

[00:10:50.06]

Eric V.: So, you think he was gettin' ideas?

[00:10:51.23]

Michael D.: That's what you do.

[00:10:52.25]

Lindy D.: Maybe. I think he's just a curious individual who respects the people around him and wants to see into their lives.

[00:11:00.01]

Eric V.: Also, he's very much into the food he offers to people. Let me read you a little quote from him when he and I were talkin' one day, and he was talkin' about your lettuces. They had just come in, and we're sittin' there, sampling them. This guy is practically misty-eyed talking about how he loves the effect that your approach, the regenerative agricultural approach to growing, how that comes out in the final product. He says, "It's about vitality of the soil. You can taste it in the lettuce. It's got more personality, character, and life." Tell me about what you're doin' in that area.

[00:11:42.28]

Michael D.: First of all, I would think that it would have to be that we cut it every day, so it's practically just been cut a few hours before he's putting it on a table.

[00:11:55.23]

Eric V.: What's the impact of that? What effect does that have on the final product?

[00:12:01.27]

Michael D.: Well, as soon as you cut a vegetable or fruit, the sugars are starting to turn into starches. The flavors are being converted, and they're losing their nutrients. So, the less time—I think the average piece of food travels fifteen hundred miles to be eaten. This is coming thirty miles in a couple'a hours, so, it makes a big difference. Our whole farm name is about feeding the soil and not really feeding the plants. We want a healthy soil; we want our soil to grow, and from that, you'll get a healthy plant.

[00:12:36.22]

Eric V.: How do you achieve that?

[00:12:38.29]

Michael D.: We have a . . . there's a lot of different . . . we call ourselves organic, after organic, we've studied permaculture. Finally, all these names have been around for a while and really haven't been—or all these terms have been around for a while, but they really haven't been . . . codified, so to speak. We use compost, biochar—which is charcoal that has been processed at low temperatures.

[00:13:16.01]

Lindy D.: We only use plant-based compost, we don't use any animal compost.

[00:13:20.04]

Michael D.: Yeah. Not that people can't use animal compost, we've always worried about—

[00:13:24.12]

Lindy D.: We don't like the risk.

[00:13:26.21]

Michael D.: Yeah, the risk associated with e. coli and stuff like that. So, we don't really use animal—not that people can't, or don't. So, really, just feeding the soil. We grow cover crops . . .

[00:13:43.21]

Lindy D.: We'll amend it with natural products, such as—

[00:13:46.22]

Michael D.: Yeah, bone meal, blood meal, Greensand.

[00:13:51.09]

Lindy D.: You know, peat. Other natural, depending on—

[00:13:57.00]

Michael D.: Vermiculite.

[00:13:58.27]

Eric V.: So, what are these adding to the soil? Like ground covers, what, nitrogen, I think it's supposed to contribute?

[00:14:03.24]

Michael D.: Yeah. So, cover crops convert nitrogen that's in the air, which is a triple molecular bond in three, and it's a really hard thing to break. Very few things can break it. It's up in the air; it's 74% of the air. A plant can take that out of the air and convert it to usable nitrogen for a plant. The only other things are lightning and like the weathering of rocks. So, that's why cover crops are important, 'cause it converts that and it stays in as a long-lasting . . . usable form of nitrogen, I believe it's—I may get this wrong— NH_4^- and NO_3^+ . I'm not good on my chemistry. But that's usable nitrogen.

[00:14:43.25]

Eric V.: You got the practical chemistry down.

[00:14:49.05]

Michael D.: Yeah. [Laughter]

[00:14:52.03]

Lindy D.: So, like, tell him about the pea tendrils.

[00:14:56.20]

Michael D.: So, we grow pea tendrils. Delicious, tastes like a pea, but we grow it—it's a cover crop—but we grow it as an edible food crop. So, as that grows, the roots you can see on there have little balls, and that's what the usable nitrogen is. So, as we fold it into the soil, it will decompose, and that's left for the next crop to grow into. So, we're taking an edible crop that we can sell, and then going—feeding the soil for the next crop that's coming up in it.

[00:15:30.04]

Eric V.: Then, from the diner's perspective, what are those pea tendrils being used for?

[00:15:35.02]

Lindy D.: I believe they use 'em like a garnish. We also will add 'em into our lettuce mixes, 'cause they taste just like fresh peas. They're only anywhere from about two to four inches long, and they just add a brightness, a freshness, to meals.

[00:15:52.23]

Michael D.: We've seen people put 'em on macaroni and cheese before. Yeah, who woulda thought? And it was delicious.

[00:16:01.02]

Lindy D.: I've made shrimp salad with pea tendrils before. I'm not sure exactly what all the restaurants are using them for, but they sure do love 'em.

[00:16:10.10]

Michael D.: Yes.

[00:16:10.10]

Eric V.: So, before we get into what you're growing, let's—you mentioned fresh-cut produce going on there. Walk me through a day of getting ready to deliver to Highlands. Sun's not even up yet, right?

[00:16:26.13]

Michael D.: Usually, the night before, the day before, chefs had been texting throughout the day, calling in an order, asking what we have. We tell 'em. That morning, we get up, dogs go out, make their little perimeter search of the farm, and we just begin cutting,

picking. Pick tomatoes, pick the eggplant, pick the peppers, pull up the carrots, cut lettuce. We have a processing shed out back, take it over there. Wash it, spin it, put it in the refrigerator while we're finishing, and then it's off to deliver. Literally, a couple of hours until we're out the door to deliver.

[00:17:05.11]

Eric V.: How many deliveries do you make in a day?

[00:17:07.27]

Michael D.: In a day? I'd say, on average, ten, maybe.

[00:17:13.17]

Lindy D.: Six to ten, average.

[00:17:16.16]

Michael D.: Yeah. We probably have at the peak, during the summer, thirty restaurants that are ordering from us. So, it'll change with the season. Obviously less in the middle of the winter and throughout the rest of the year, it's full-on.

[00:17:34.02]

Eric V.: Is that because of what's growing at certain times of year? Is that how it ebbs and flows with different restaurants, or . . . ?

[00:17:40.11]

Michael D.: Yep. Really, winter is the only time where we don't have a lot of stuff, 'cause you can really tailor what we grow to the season. We get four seasons in Alabama.

[00:17:49.09]

Lindy D.: We just don't produce as much in the winter. So, it's not that the restaurants slow down, it's that we slow down; we can't provide as much.

[00:17:56.21]

Michael D.: The sun slows down. [Laughter] There's not enough sun.

[00:17:56.22]

Lindy D.: Yeah. We have fewer daylight hours of sunlight; then things are not going to grow as quickly, or as efficiently. So, we can't produce as much in the winter. The restaurants would take as much as the summer if they could get it from us.

[00:18:14.01]

Eric V.: So, how do you adjust to the seasons? Obviously, I see a lot more growing in greenhouse kinds of things and under covers. Tell me how you're dealing with this during the colder months.

[00:18:28.05]

Michael D.: Lindy usually does the seed orders, and just through experience, we know what can live to be and grow and survive in twenty-degree weather. We know what can take it when it's ninety-five degrees for two weeks. So, it's all tailored around, usually, the extremes. We're trying to buffer those extremes in what we do; if we can shave a few degrees off in the winter and keep it warmer, it allows us to grow a few more things. If we can . . . have our irrigation, our water, so that the droughts aren't affecting us as much, and that goes back to the soil, a healthy soil will hold more water and you're able to live through a drought a little bit better than you would be on an unhealthy soil. Mainly through the soil structure; charcoal and, it's a very porous material, so it allows a

lot of organisms, microorganisms, mycorrhizal fungi, to live in those areas. They'll take biomass that's in the ground, eat it, decompose, and it's a self-perpetuating—it grows the soil. That allows it to hold extra water. You can handle the drought better. It will drain better. So, everything is tailored around buffering those extremes, and knowing which products to grow in what season.

[00:19:53.24]

Eric V.: And that's purely from experience, I would imagine. [Laughter]

[00:19:55.25]

Michael D.: Yes. Lotta failure. Trial and error.

[00:20:01.02]

Eric V.: Tell me a little bit about how you got started. We kinda skirted around that earlier. But you're waitin' at Bottega, you want to farm.

[00:20:10.25]

Michael D.: Yeah. Well, I wanted to work outside, and I really had not thought about it as much until he brought it up, and I was like, "Wow, that is something that— I could do that, I would like that." As I got into it more, and my friends were chefs. This is who I hung out with at night; we'd go out after work and they'd talk shop, and I'm into food. So, now I'm doing it. I'm growing it. I'm getting the inspiration for tasting what a carrot really tastes like. If you haven't had a carrot out of your own ground, it's not the same thing as what you buy in a grocery store. Lindy knew what it was like because her grandparents grew food.

[00:20:53.01]

Lindy D.: My extended family are in agriculture in North Alabama, so I had grown up on homegrown vegetables and food, and didn't realize it was a trend back when I was a child. That's just how country people did, they grew everything and they shared with their families.

[00:21:10.15]

Eric V.: I'm sorry, where in North Alabama?

[00:21:14.13]

Lindy D.: In Gadsden and DeKalb County. So, while I didn't grow up on a farm, I visited my great-uncles and -aunts' farms in the summers and school breaks, and was around cows and chickens, and hundred-acre crops of produce.

[00:21:32.20]

Eric V.: Was that the part of the appeal for you in getting . . . ? 'Cause you came from an office environment, I believe, before you started?

[00:21:38.03]

Lindy D.: I came from outdoor retail. Partly. I mean, I wasn't a foodie at that time in my life, but I did want to do something outdoors. I'd gone to school for horticulture and did not enjoy it, but knew I liked to be outdoors. I realized, after volunteering with Michael, that I liked growing edible things. I just wasn't very good at growing pretty things. So.

[00:22:08.08]

Eric V.: So, it worked out really well, then.

[00:22:09.07]

Lindy D.: It did. It did.

[00:22:12.05]

Eric V.: So, you're wantin' to work outdoors. Frank says, "I know this guy out in Leeds with some land." Walk me through how that whole thing evolved.

[00:22:23.04]

Michael D.: He said—and I had no experience in it, I believe Frank didn't, either, "Let's just see what we can do." We went out there, tilled up a few, a couple of—not even an acre, probably. I know the menu, bought some of the seeds, threw 'em in the ground, see what we could do, and from then, it was just learn.

[00:22:46.09]

Lindy D.: Well, Frank and Pardis would also—when they would do their travels, like to Italy or France—would bring back seeds to give and try to see what. Sometimes they were successful; most of the times, they weren't. But that was always fun, to have seeds that they had found on their travels that they wanted to try.

[00:23:05.19]

Eric V.: What were the factors in success? Growing environment, or just condition when they got here?

[00:23:13.00]

Lindy D.: Some of 'em—like there's a wild arugula from Italy that Frank and Pardis really like, and we've tried to grow it numerous times. While we can grow it successfully for personal consumption, we just can't grow it in the quantities needed to meet the demand of the restaurants.

[00:23:29.18]

Michael D.: Mainly because it's very price-prohibitive. To find the seeds is a ridiculously expensive . . .

[00:23:39.04]

Lindy D.: That and— Yeah. And a lot of the things that we grow are very fragile, so they're not hardy. You have to be very particular with the soil conditions; how you water 'em, how often you water 'em. We do most everything by hand. We're not running big tractors, planting. We're manually, planting everything manually, weeding it manually, watering it manually, cutting it. Everything with our hands. So, some vegetables are even pickier than that, and just the slightest dip in temperature or the slightest dip in humidity, and they just don't do as well. Or they have natural pests that they're more inclined to.

[00:24:20.00]

Eric V.: Yeah. This reminds me a lot of reading about early European explorers. They would go somewhere—the bread fruit, for example. Plant it on the ship and take it back. That's how tomatoes and all that came to be in Europe.

[00:24:35.16]

Michael D.: Yeah. We have a lot of things that we grow, that would be an Italian variety—we grow Polish varieties.

[00:24:46.26]

Lindy D.: Yeah. We really like, we don't get all of our seeds, but we do like to use Seed Savers, because they're all about trying to diversify the heirloom varieties of seeds that are being used.

[00:24:57.02]

Eric V.: Tell us about Seed Savers, please.

[00:25:01.16]

Lindy D.: Well, they're a company that catalogues and shares and saves seeds, but they also sell seeds. We're not part of the community that shares and saves seeds, but we do purchase a good bit of our seeds from them. Basically, most seeds that you're gonna purchase from a big box store are gonna be just a handful of varieties, and you lose flavor, you lose . . . you need diversity. Not just diversity for flavor, but it's much like the banana; we're down to one variety of a banana, when hundreds of years ago, there were multiple varieties. If you don't keep that diversity—

[00:26:02.02]

Michael D.: —going, you risk— it's a fragility to the system of it, that it could just break down very easily without . . . something to substitute in its place.

[00:26:12.04]

Eric V.: Then it's lost, it's unrecoverable.

[00:26:13.00]

Lindy D.: Yeah. We actually found out about Seed Savers through Frank. They had reached out to him about local farmers that they wanted to share some seedlings with, to try to expand, and he shared our name with them. I'm so glad he did, because that's where we get a lot of our seeds now.

[00:26:35.28]

Eric V.: About when was this?

[00:26:39.01]

Lindy D.: I would guess it was around 2004, 2005, but my memory's not . . . I wouldn't, you know, promise that. But I think that's about right. [Laughter]

[00:26:53.17]

Eric V.: How big, what kind of quantities of seed do you order from them . . . ?

[00:27:02.09]

Lindy D.: Well, we also get a good bit of our seed from Johnny's in Maine, which is a long-established seed company. Depending on what the seed is, I can get a packet of something that has twenty-five to two hundred seeds in it, to we order some seeds by the pound, to our pea tendrils, we order by a hundred pounds at a time. So, it kinda depends. The lettuces we're ordering in larger bulks than . . .

[00:27:38.10]

Michael D.: Eggplants, peppers.

[00:27:40.20]

Lindy D.: Eggplants and tomatoes and whatnot.

[00:27:40.20]

Eric V.: Because of quantity planted, or . . . ?

[00:27:43.05]

Michael D.: Yeah.

[00:27:43.05]

Lindy D.: Well—

[00:27:43.05]

Michael D.: We plant lettuce practically every day.

[00:27:47.29]

Lindy D.: Yeah, it's . . .

[00:27:51.19]

Michael D.: For a pepper, we're planting them maybe twice a year we'll have one crop, and then a few weeks later she'll start another crop, so we extend that, but you can only grow a pepper till it frosts, and then you're done.

[00:28:03.22]

Lindy D.: So, I start all the nightshades by seed. I'll start a couple different batches—we'll use the pepper, for example. I'll have maybe ten varieties of sweet pepper, and I'll start maybe fifty to a hundred seedlings of each pepper. Then what makes it, I will transplant in the ground. Then what makes it from there hopefully will fruit, and will . . . there's a lot of loss in seedlings in plantings, 'cause you've got pests such as caterpillars and slugs, and other insects that can get it when it first pops up as a seedling, to when you plant it in the ground. We're always having to judge the frost. Sometimes you have—we'll have frosts that have been much earlier or much later, and that can zap it. Because it's one thing to go protect what you've planted in your home garden; you can't go out and protect a thousand tomato plants plus five hundred eggplant or whatnot. We have coyotes and rabbits and deer that will come nibble and break it off or cut worms, and

that's where the dogs and cats actually come in handy on a farm, is they help decrease the actual wild animal impact.

[00:29:25.14]

Eric V.: You're mentioning running the perimeter when they first go out. Is that what you're referring to?

[00:29:28.23]

Michael D.: Yeah, they like to make a little circle and see what was going on during the night while they were in. We noticed, just our neighbors, we'll give them some seed or some plants that we had extra, and we trade a lot with them. They have chickens, so we trade eggs and stuff like that. But they will have massive deer problems, and we don't. We had one time, there was a deer problem and it was in the worst drought that we have ever had in my twenty years of doing it, and I think it stressed the deer population enough to make it worth them to risk coming up where they could be predators, to come up and eat some stuff. But other'n that, we don't have a deer problem.

[00:30:22.19]

Eric V.: 'Cause of the dogs.

[00:30:23.01]

Michael D.: I would say that; there's also a hunting camp nearby. So, they may be keeping down the local population as well.

[00:30:25.00]

Lindy D.: Our neighbors would beg to differ.

[00:30:28.19]

Michael D.: Yeah. Well, that's true. That's true.

[00:30:30.26]

Eric V.: So, what all do you grow for Highlands and other customers? I guess it's a seasonal sort of thing, so . . . I want to come back to the daily planting of the lettuce and that kind of thing in a minute, 'cause that fascinates me.

[00:30:45.13]

Lindy D.: I would say the regular things that Frank's looking for from us are the arugula, the mixed lettuces, cabbage in the winter. Sometimes frisée and radicchio. Seasonal herbs, so like in the winter, chervil, dill, parsley; in the summer, basil, rosemary, year-round. Frank's really good about taking what you have. But I think the lettuces is his . . . bread and butter from us. Also, carrots, beets, radishes, turnips in the winter and through the spring, and then going into summer, cherry tomatoes, heirloom tomatoes, squash blossoms—

[00:31:42.14]

Michael D.: That's something that's very delicate that has a very short shelf life.

[00:31:47.09]

Lindy D.: Yeah. Squash blossoms you pick in the morning and within a couple hours, they're closed up. They're still usable, but the quicker a restaurant can get 'em, the easier it is for chefs to work with them. While you can hold on to squash blossoms for a day or two, it's best to use 'em the day of. Eggplant, cucumbers, sweet peppers, poblano peppers, is pretty much what Frank's getting from us.

[00:32:27.06]

Eric V.: Did you start out with such a variety? What'd you start out doing?

[00:32:30.26]

Michael D.: Started out probably with arugula, it was the one thing that you're only going to get a certain variety from a commodity broker. Doesn't have much flavor and, as I was saying with the carrot—if you've had some that's been grown locally, it's just a different animal. It's a different taste.

[00:32:54.02]

Eric V.: You get more of that peppery flavor?

[00:32:56.00]

Michael D.: Oh, it's absolutely a more peppery flavor and, the more times you cut it, the more peppery it gets. So, it's hard to do in the winter because they grow so slow, but in the spring, we can get upwards of three cuttings off a single plant. That third cutting is incredibly different from the first one; so much more pepper flavor to it.

[00:33:19.28]

Eric V.: About how many days in between?

[00:33:23.28]

Michael D.: Cutting? Ten to fourteen, I would say. Whereas, in the winter, you really can only get one cutting 'cause it takes so long, and then the pressures of insects or just the weather makes it where—we could eat it, but selling, you want it to be pretty, too. So, at that point, getting just to planting every day, I'll cut that arugula, we'll pull it up and replant it that same day.

[00:33:52.23]

Eric V.: The reason seems obvious, but why are you doing that?

[00:33:55.06]

Lindy D.: Two reasons: one, our big thing is quality. We really try to put a lot of effort into providing the highest-quality produce to Frank and other restaurants. And two is, the restaurants never know how busy they're going to be—I mean, they can judge, but they don't know if they're going to sell out of a certain dish one night to the next. So, for them having the availability to order six days a week means we need to be able to have it available six days a week. So, every farm has what works for them. For us, it's that availability, being able; sometimes they text at two in the morning what they need. We don't always—we're not always successful at getting them what they need, but if we can plant every day, that ensures that we have it ready for them. It also gives us an income that's not just, "Okay, we plant it, we wait three months, and then we have to, you know, sell it all at once." This way, we can have a little bit going at all times.

[00:35:12.00]

Eric V.: Keep that stream going.

[00:35:13.13]

Lindy D.: Yeah.

[00:35:14.24]

Michael D.: Mm-hm.

[00:35:16.26]

Eric V.: Which I would imagine, in your business, is pretty important.

[00:35:20.14]

Michael D.: I imagine it's for most people. But yeah, particularly for us, because at any point in time, the weather can hit you.

[00:35:28.03]

Lindy D.: Yeah. We've had, when we were farming in Leeds, we were in a floodplain. We did not realize that when we built. So, there were times when we would flood, and we would lose literally everything we had and we'd have to start over from scratch. So, you're looking at four to six weeks before we have an income, because we have to pull everything up, we have to replant it, and we have to hope it doesn't flood again.

[00:35:49.21]

Eric V.: Yeah. More expenses along the way, as well.

[00:35:53.00]

Lindy D.: Exactly. The amount of seeds and plants we've lost due to Mother Nature is . . . that's every farmer's . . .

[00:36:02.17]

Eric V.: Yeah. You get a bag of a hundred seeds, how many plants do you expect to get out of it?

[00:36:05.29]

Michael D.: Depending on which seed, 80%.

[00:36:12.16]

Lindy D.: That's what—I would say 75% is what I would hope to get, but I had tomatoes last summer that did not like the rain every day till the middle end of July, and I had certain varieties that I didn't get a single plant because the weather just—they didn't like the weather and they rotted, so.

[00:36:38.12]

Michael D.: But it's always a constant battle with the weather. Nowadays, I've noticed a shift. And we'll notice that, early winter, you'll see a period in early January or February where it's . . . unusually warm, like ridiculously warm. Our fig trees will start flowering a month early.

[00:36:59.24]

Lindy D.: The blueberries already have flowers on them.

[00:37:01.02]

Michael D.: Blueberries will start flowering a month early. We don't do peaches, but I've talked to peach farmers; they're flowering early. Then, we typically have a frost in March, and you can even have it into April. It's completely normal. But at that point, these plants have already flowered. Now, you're scrambling to protect 'em. I think it's as a result of global warming. You can't say it on such a small scale and such a localized place, but that's . . . I believe that's what's happening.

[00:37:30.14]

Eric V.: Well, what are some of the challenges that climate change is presenting to farmers like you?

[00:37:35.03]

Michael D.: It's the extremes.

[00:37:37.04]

Lindy D.: The extremes.

[00:37:37.04]

Michael D.: It's heavy rainfalls, because of a moisture-soaked atmosphere.

[00:37:44.23]

Lindy D.: The storms are much more severe.

[00:37:46.11]

Michael D.: And the droughts are much more prolonged.

[00:37:47.15]

Lindy D.: Exactly. While we are no longer in a floodplain where we're farming, I feel for the farmers that still are, because in 2003 the first flood that hit us in Leeds was considered a hundred-year flood. [Interviewer's note: Comparison of flooding chance is based on probability. With a 100-year flood, there's a 1 percent (1 in 100) chance that level will be equaled or exceeded in any given year.] And after that, we started flooding once a year, and then we started flooding twice a year, and then three times a year. That's what helped spur us to get out of Leeds, is because we couldn't fight the flooding. That had not been a problem decades before.

[00:38:27.06]

Eric V.: Right. It's that one percent of a storm like that happening in this year, and then it's happening every year.

[00:38:32.15]

Lindy D.: This is an—

[00:38:31.16]

Michael D.: This is a little more juiced up, there's just a little bit more to it. It'll last a little bit longer.

[00:38:40.12]

Lindy D.: And this is anecdotal, but I feel like the lightning has gotten worse. In the summer, or any time of year, actually, we have fragile lettuces planted in our raised beds. When we're gonna have a heavy downpour, we cover it with plastic. In the winter months, if we know the storm front's moving through, we can go cover before it reaches us and that's fine, but in the summer, if it's ninety degrees out—actually, if it's above seventy degrees, if one of those storms comes, you can't cover it till the storm's right upon you, because it will steam everything underneath that plastic. So, many times, we cover in the rain to protect it, and then as soon as the rain's gone, go out and uncover. But when there's lightning with these storms, it's actually not a very safe thing that we do, running out for thirty, forty-five minutes to try and protect the lettuces that are going to be sold the next day with lightning striking all around us. I don't remember being—the first ten years we did this, I don't remember being scared as often, covering in lightning. It seems to be with almost every storm now. So, it's anecdotal; I don't know that that's a direct link, but the weather definitely has been different.

[00:39:59.26]

Eric V.: The lightning is a safety concern.

[00:40:03.28]

Lindy D.: Yes. What we do to protect the lettuces. [Laughter]

[00:40:09.02]

Eric V.: Describe where you're growing; size, scale, you have a combination of greenhouse and outdoor plots.

[00:40:18.00]

Michael D.: So, we're on about twenty acres here. Only about five is in pasture land. It's terraced, and we crop rotate. So, one place will be growing the nightshades one year. It'll switch to the cucurbits the next year. And we try to have about a three-year plan.

[00:40:43.00]

Lindy D.: And we're letting it go fallow this winter. That's why you're not seeing anything in the actual ground right now, is we're letting it—

[00:40:51.26]

Eric V.: And that what-you-bits?

[00:40:52.02]

Michael D.: Cucurbits, like cucumbers.

[00:40:56.20]

Eric V.: Okay.

[00:40:58.02]

Michael D.: Squash in that family, but that's one of the things that we'll grow in the nightshade—nightshades have a tendency to hold disease pathogens in their leaves and

stuff so, if you put it on the ground, it's gonna stay in the ground for a couple of years. So, you want to move 'em away from that location for a few years to get the disease away or give it a chance to die. That's the theory behind crop rotation.

[00:41:26.07]

Lindy D.: And we have about twenty raised cold frames and we are down to two hoop houses. And then we have a seedling greenhouse.

[00:41:35.22]

Eric V.: And describe the raised beds for people who don't get out on a farm too often.

[00:41:41.15]

Michael D.: They're made out of 8x8x16 concrete block. They're six feet wide by fifty-foot long, about two and a half to three-foot deep, and . . . we will fill them with dirt and then, from then on, we are adding compost or growing cover crops like the pea tendrils, to increase that soil's vitality that's in there. It's . . . became more, because it's a lot easier to cut standing up than it is squatting down on the ground, that was kind of more the theory behind it. It was really something that we had seen that, whoever had owned the Warnocks'—our friends, Prince and Alecia Warnock's house before them—had one. We had seen it out there, we're like, "Wow, this is so much easier than squatting on the ground." And so, we kind of adopted that for ourselves.

[00:42:34.17]

Lindy D.: Well, you can also control the pest and the weeds easier in the raised beds. So, for fragile produce that— our property has—we have been fighting kudzu. So, to try to plant fragile lettuces in the ground that kudzu can just take over so dramatically, so quickly, raised beds can work well for the more fragile stuff.

[00:43:04.23]

Michael D.: And then our greenhouses. We had just bought 'em from a nursery, I believe, that was going out of business. I took 'em down, and it's just a lot easier for a lot of things that require a little bit more gentle—like the micros that regrow.

[00:43:23.11]

Lindy D.: Well, we used to have four. We've lost two to weather events. So, now we're down to two. But . . . some things do better in the ground. Some things do better in a cold frame. Some things do better in a greenhouse. So, for us, having a diversified way of growing things can help. So, if we cannot cover something in a cold frame to save it from a weather event, we don't have to worry about the greenhouse, 'cause the greenhouse is covered. It's also, you've got the airflow through it, as well. So, that's ideal for some things. But some things don't do well under a greenhouse, so they're better to do in the ground or in a cold frame, where it doesn't have to ever be covered. So, there's just diversity, in different things growing better in different ways.

[00:44:13.20]

Eric V.: And the weather events you mean wind, or . . .

[00:44:14.29]

Michael D.: Really, it's more torrential downpours.

[00:44:17.22]

Lindy D.: Torrential downpours would be the number-one culprit. Wind can, though, break your tomato plants or anything else. Then, what took down—we had one hoop house that a gravity wave, which is a rare weather wind event, took out, and we had another

one that we lost to ice. We did not live on the property and we had an ice storm; the ice got so heavy, by the time we could walk the roads through the ice to get there, it had collapsed it. And it was beyond repair.

[00:44:52.05]

Eric V.: And everything underneath it lost.

[00:44:53.19]

Lindy D.: Yes.

[00:44:55.05]

Michael D.: I think it was.

[00:44:57.17]

Lindy D.: It was.

[00:44:57.17]

Michael D.: Probably.

[00:45:03.12]

Eric V.: How . . . how has . . . Highlands and, going back to the relationship y'all started back in the early [19]90s, early to mid-[19]90s, how has that affected the food scene here in Birmingham?

[00:45:25.16]

Michael D.: I mean . . .

[00:45:27.27]

Lindy D.: There wouldn't be a food scene.

[00:45:27.27]

Michael D.: Yeah, there wouldn't.

[00:45:28.15]

Lindy D.: I don't think.

[00:45:28:17]

Michael D.: The chefs that he has, that's worked for him, have gone on and been the other mainstays that are in this town. We forged relationships with them that are just as tight, and they're great customers. They've changed this city, really. We don't exist without those chefs going out from Frank and doing their own thing.

[00:45:57.23]

Eric V.: To ask the obvious, why? Why wouldn't you exist?

[00:45:59.27]

Michael D.: There's just not enough people that would do it. We would just be full of— franchise restaurants. That's all we would be.

[00:46:09.01]

Lindy D.: And Frank didn't just help to educate chefs, but I think he helped to educate the public to appreciate local farming. I think a lot of that movement, there's a lot of people involved in it now, but I do think Frank was at the forefront of caring enough and taking

his time, whether it was through interviews, whether it was through his menu, whether it was through talking to people, doing charity events or whatnot.

[00:46:30.18]

Michael D.: Or just buying something from somebody that's just trying to get their feet on the ground and trying to start doing it. He'd take a chance—

[00:46:32.25]

Lindy D.: And helping to promote—he helped a lot of people that started with nothing, and he helped to nurture and support that to be successful. Part of that is, he did that in relationships with Michael and then eventually me, but also, the public wants local food now. When I came into this back in the early 2000s, I didn't know people that— "Well, let's go eat somewhere that we can get local food." Now you hear that all the time. That is the over-the-mountain mantra of eating out; you go somewhere that's local. And that didn't exist before Frank, I don't think. [Interviewer's note: "Over the mountain" refers to the suburbs south of Birmingham and on the other side of Red Mountain.]

[00:47:17.02]

Eric V.: I know that Terra Preta does not—

[00:47:17.13]

Lindy D.: And Pardis.

[00:47:21.04]

Eric V.: Does not sell to Pepper Place, but you came around right at the beginning of the Pepper Place era. Would we have pop-up farmer markets like that without these kinds of relationships having been pre-established?

[00:47:36.16]

Lindy D.: I don't know, I don't think.

[00:47:37.03]

Michael D.: I would doubt it.

[00:47:38.11]

Lindy D.: Yeah. I only knew of Finley Avenue when I started farming.

[00:47:39.09]

Michael D.: No one knew what—no one had tasted what a real food tasted like. You'd only had what came from a big commodity broker that had been shipped a thousand miles away. You didn't realize what something could taste like. It's an ineffable quality. You have to experience it to understand it; I can't describe how good a blueberry that just came off this—our blueberries came from her grandfather, who he got from his property . . . what, years before then. Well, you tell the story. I'm probably getting it wrong.

[00:48:17.25]

Lindy D.: No, they're just an heirloom, rabbit-eye variety. They're smaller, they're darker, they've got more flavor. We've been told from the chefs at Highlands—or from Dol—that they hold up in baking better. That's all the blueberries I've ever had. [Interviewer's note: "Dol" is Dolester Miles, the James Beard Award-winning head pastry chef for the Stitts' four restaurants.] That's what I grew up on, so I can't really . . .

[00:48:43.14]

Michael D.: But when you compare it to the modern, hybridized, you can—easy to harvest, they're plumper—these taste better. But they're harder to pick. They don't all ripen at once. They ripen up gradually.

[00:48:57.06]

Lindy D.: They're very time-consuming to harvest.

[00:49:01.08]

Michael D.: That's something you're not going to get from a franchise restaurant, or from . . . it's just the variety you choose. You're not gonna get these kinda foods unless you have a relationship with the farmer that has grown 'em, and has had their family hand down stuff: knowledge and varieties.

[00:49:23.18]

Lindy D.: Well, and I think too, getting back to the chef-farm relationship, especially with an emphasis on Frank and Pardis, is that we have to be flexible with them, but they have to be flexible with us. And I think when you can communicate that with one another, then you can both be successful. We have sold to restaurants where a chef understood that, communicated well with us, and I would hope to think that we communicated well with him or her, they move on, and then the chef that replaces them, they don't like that we—well, we'll have it most every day, but we may not, we may run out or something may happen and we can't. So, they may go with a food purveyor where, no matter what, they can get that product every Monday or every Tuesday, and they don't have to worry about whether we may or may not have it. So, I think there's a lot of trust in that relationship, and the restaurants that we like to do business with best—and Frank's restaurants are the ones we still like to do business with most because they're understanding. They understand when we tell them, "We think we're going to have this." Sometimes they

need to plan their menus way ahead, and we say, "Okay, well, we think we'll have tomatoes around the first week of June." That may happen, that may not happen, and they roll with the punches with us. At the same time, they can say, "Hey, your mixed lettuce has a lot of red greens in it, and we want more greens and less red in it. Can you try to work changing your mix for us that way?"

[00:51:11.25]

Michael D.: Different size of a vegetable.

[00:51:14.21]

Lindy D.: Or a different color variety.

[00:51:15.16]

Michael D.: Or a shape, that the application that they want to use it for is different.

[00:51:21.16]

Lindy D.: Yeah.

[00:51:21.11]

Eric V.: With whom would you have these conversations?

[00:51:24.19]

Michael D.: The chefs that are there.

[00:51:27.04]

Lindy D.: Frank will sometimes call you up when he's gone in and seen what's going on and has a difference of opinion or something. He'll call Michael and say, "Hey, would you

do this?" Or whatnot. Frank is really good in that he trains and teaches the people under him where he doesn't have to do that as much now as he did in the beginning. And you don't find that at every restaurant.

[00:51:49.08]

Michael D.: We've noticed a big change in just the knowledge of what a farmer—I can remember at the beginning, people who didn't know what the eggplant was on the bush. Or what time of year an eggplant was grown. Now, they know more of when something is in season.

[00:52:10.07]

Lindy D.: Frank's chefs are very knowledgeable with that. We don't really have to explain the farming system to his chefs as much, 'cause he's done a lot to educate them. And other chefs are good like that, as well. Where was I going . . . ?

[00:52:29.06]

Michael D.: Not quite sure. [Laughter]

[00:52:33.28]

Eric V.: Talking about the communication, about how they're letting you know the specifics of what they're looking for. I think we pretty well covered that. Now, I just totally drew a blank on what I was about to ask . . . [Laughter] Oh, yeah. Your customers now. Generally, are they Frank Stitt restaurants and people who've gone on to open their own?

[00:53:02.10]

Michael D.: From some degree of separation, they usually are. I worked there. Go ahead, you were going to say something.

[00:53:08.12]

Lindy D.: No.

[00:53:08.13]

Michael D.: I worked there, met a group of people, went out—were either the head chef or started their own place. Their group of chefs, I met them. It's a very transient workplace. They'll work in this kitchen, want to learn something from someone else. They'll move to another kitchen for a while. Want to try a different style of cooking, will move to somewhere else. But along the way, we've run into each other. It's still a small city, even though it's . . . got a million people in the metropolitan area. But I believe the restaurant community's pretty tight, and that, you kind of know. You've worked with somebody before; you know what kind of chef that person is. And I've kind of just, since I deliver every day, I meet these people. I meet the prep cook, you know? I meet the guy or the girl that is chopping up mirepoix for the morning. And so, it's just been passed down. From some degree of separation, you can trace it back to a few people, and it just continues that way. I just . . . they will have heard about me, and they can get my number from a friend of theirs.

[00:54:24.27]

Eric V.: Or they've been ordering from you anyway.

[00:54:27.09]

Michael D.: Yeah, exactly.

[00:54:30.06]

Eric V.: And so, you have the luxury, I guess, of having a word-of-mouth kind of business, not having to go out and try to market your wares and cold-call people and things like that. How do you determine who you can take on or how much you can take on?

[00:54:51.00]

Michael D.: Yeah, that's a . . . we try to grow every year a little bit. But we've had to definitely turn people down, haven't we?

[00:54:55.27]

Lindy D.: Yeah. It shifts. Frank and Pardis's three restaurants are consistent. They're not goin' anywhere. Some of the other standard restaurants in Birmingham that are not going anywhere have a continued relationship with us. Others come and go, depending on who's running their kitchen. So, there may be a restaurant that is a regular customer for five years; that chef moves on, new chef doesn't want anything. We don't sell to 'em for six months or a year, and then eventually someone comes back in. When that happens, we can pick up somebody else who's been sayin', "Hey, once you have extra product, please call me."

[00:55:40.02]

Michael D.: We're up front with people, too, about—

[00:55:42.09]

Lindy D.: We're honest, yeah.

[00:55:42.22]

Michael D.: Yes, we have a lot of business now, but we can, we'll have a little bit more of this available. They'll get their foot in the door, so to speak. And maybe, if we like what

they're doin' and they like what we're doin', we'll grow a little bit more from that, you know?

[00:56:04.05]

Lindy D.: It also goes to the point where we don't want to turn down any business, but at the same time, when we know places are treating their employees well, when they treat us with respect, when they don't hassle over paying us—'cause it's unbelievable, there are businesses that don't want to pay farmers—will hassle. As farmers, you make the decision. Farmers like us, not the conglomerates that own a thousand acres of corn out in Kansas and Oklahoma and the Midwest, but little farmers like us, niche farmers that we're classified as. You don't go into it for the money. So, that plays a part in it, too. That's one thing that Frank has always been very gracious about. We've never had any problem getting paid or communicating with anyone, with him or his staff.

[00:57:03.06]

Michael D.: Kinda like how he treats everybody. And that goes a long, long, long way for us.

[00:57:03.12]

Lindy D.: Yeah. So, to a point, there have been businesses that we haven't just stopped selling to them, but as things peter out or it's winter and we're slower, we may choose to, you know, go with someone else that we know treats people with the respect they deserve.

[00:57:23.20]

Eric V.: It's kind of like dating in that sense.

[00:57:23.20]

Michael D.: It is. [Laughter]

[00:57:26.29]

Lindy D.: Yeah.

[00:57:28.17]

Eric V.: About how much of your business are the Stitt restaurants?

[00:57:31.25]

Michael D.: We have about thirty, and he owns three. [Interviewer's note: Some view Bottega as one restaurant. But the café side has its own open kitchen and distinct menu. The café and the formal dining room have separate entrances and patios. The Stitts consider the café and the formal dining room to be two restaurants.]

[00:57:38.08]

Lindy D.: Well, I'd say we're . . . there's thirty we sell to, but I'd say there's about fifteen, twenty we consistently sell to. But his, I mean, we always sell to Frank's places first, just because we owe our profession to him. We wouldn't be doing this if he hadn't gotten Michael started, and then been accepting of me when I came around.

[00:58:02.11]

Eric V.: How exactly did he get you started?

[00:58:05.21]

Michael D.: I think he put out a general feeler to the staff, "Hey, if anybody's interested in tryin' to grow some food, I would like that." Just so happened that I lived next to the Warnocks. That family, that just let a stranger come to their house—you know, he introduced us, obviously—

[00:58:22.08]

Lindy D.: He made the introduction for you and didn't he also pay your—

[00:58:28.01]

Michael D.: Yeah, he bought drip tape and he was, "If anything you need me to get, I'll buy it to get you started doin' it."

[00:58:37.17]

Lindy D.: That first year, I thought he paid for your irrigation or something like that.

[00:58:40.12]

Michael D.: Yeah, yeah. Exactly. To run water out to the field.

[00:58:41.22]

Lindy D.: And that's what I love, too, about him taking people—whether it's farming or fishing or cooking or whatever—and helps support them and cultivate them. Not just for, now he knows he has our loyalty; he has this relationship with us, we're going to continue to grow for Frank as long as we're growing. But he also, I think, does it because he wants to see the other people around him succeed as well as he does. I mean, I think he and Pardis are both like that.

[00:59:15.04]

Eric V.: Yeah, 'cause it seems like . . . it's a rising tide lifting all ships kind of thing.

[00:59:21.12]

Lindy D.: Exactly, exactly. That's where we go to. We like to sell to people who are just good people.

[00:59:30.18]

Michael D.: And you can tell, because they'll . . . they just have a lot of the same staff that you see. The restaurants, it's just like the same people that are there, and they like working there and they enjoy being there.

[00:59:43.14]

Eric V.: So, when you talk with Frank and folks like Zack Redes, chef de cuisine at Highlands, you're having multiple conversations with them. "This is what I've got now, this is what I anticipate coming up." Just . . .

[01:00:00.22]

Michael D.: Yeah. I'll go in, we'll deliver in the morning, say hello, "Hey, what's goin' on at the farm?" And I can see that a couple of weeks out, we're gonna have these peppers available. We have a certain variety, a lot of, that are large with a thick wall; they can be stuffed. Or, we have a lot that are thin and long with thin skin that are better for sautéing. So, he's like, "Ooh, that's what I'd like, to try that out. That's something I want to try to do, or to work with, are the thin-skinned ones. They have this great flavor, so we'll try something sautéed with them."

[01:00:43.01]

Eric V.: Are these more conversations with Frank or with a—

[01:00:46.03]

Michael D.: Usually I see Zack or I'll see John [Rolen's Bottega's chef de cuisine] or—I'll see the chef de cuisine more often, because he's between three different places. And a lot of times, normally, I see the prep people and this conversation will take place over text message or something like that, about what we have coming up. Usually, it's a weekly discussion. Sunday, Monday, I'm gettin' a text—"Hey, what's goin' on at the farm?" That's usually what the text is. "Whatcha got goin' on?"

[01:01:16.04]

Lindy D.: But also, the chefs are—most chefs, especially the people working under Frank and Pardis—are pretty good at, they can kinda . . . they get good at reading what we're gonna have. They're kinda, "Okay, we've been asking for two pounds of arugula and they've been bringing us one and three-quarters pound, so they've kinda been light a little bit." So, they kinda know that we're tryin' but we're not meeting that exact to the amount, or they know that we have an overabundance of something. But then, also through text messages late at night, they can say, "Hey, I want two pounds of arugula," and we just sold the last arugula or something happened and we don't have what we thought, and we can say, "Well, we don't have arugula, but we do have these other greens; we have some baby kale or some pea tendrils or some tatsoi." And sometimes they're like, "Okay, in a pinch, I'll take this other green you have." So, it goes back to that communication and that flexibility, that they're willing to still work with us and use something else we may be able to provide them in place of it until we get back to having the product they want, first choice.

[01:02:23.17]

Eric V.: And they seem to value that opportunity for creativity, as well.

[01:02:26.21]

Lindy D.: Yeah.

[01:02:26.21]

Michael D.: Yeah. It's not often that you get to use a lot of the things that people grow, that the local farmers grow. And there's so many now, compared to when we started. I don't remember any, not that I had my pulse on the finger of the local farmers' twenty-something years ago, but now, there's a lot. You have a lot.

[01:02:46.14]

Eric V.: Wasn't seeing a whole lot of tatsoi at the farmer's market, even.

[01:02:52.01]

Michael D.: Yeah, no. [Laughter] We love tatsoi.

[01:02:54.01]

Lindy D.: Well, and, tatsoi is an edible trap crop. We use it as a trap crop.

[01:02:59.22]

Eric V.: What is a trap crop?

[01:03:01.06]

Lindy D.: So, we'll plant it with our arugula and other greens. The insect pests like it before—they will go to it before they will go to the arugula, so if you can throw some trap crops in there, like you can plant radishes with squash and the pest will go to the radishes before they'll go to the squash. But we do that with tatsoi, and if the tatsoi does not get eaten, it is a wonderful Asian green that I love, but places like to use it. We sometimes will grow just crops of it because somebody just wants to put it on their menu. But most

of the time, it's used as a trap crop. But goin' back to the pea tendrils, it's an edible crop, but it's also providing nitrogen. So, trying to find those dual—

[01:03:51.03]

Michael D.: Uses.

[01:03:51.13]

Lindy D.: Yeah.

[01:04:00.02]

Eric V.: We started to get into this earlier; let's go through seasons and what you tend to grow.

[01:04:06.29]

Michael D.: So, this was trial and error, a lot. As we buy from these seed companies, Johnny's is from Maine, so when they're sayin', "Hey, this works well in the summer," now, that doesn't necessarily mean it's gonna work well in southern Alabama.

[01:04:24.05]

Eric V.: More like spring.

[01:04:24.27]

Michael D.: Yeah. And so, it's kinda why we like the Seed Savers Exchange, because these people—“This seed came from a guy in Mississippi in the 1800s.” Kind of the same weather that we have. So, we can generally trust that, "Hey, this will work in a very humid summer." So, we'll pick those varieties to grow in. Am I going somewhere with this, Lindy?

[01:04:54.05]

Lindy D.: No. [Laughter]

[01:04:59.14]

Michael D.: So, everything is determined by—and we get four seasons here. We get a lot of extremes here. We get really cold, we get really hot, we get really wet, we get really dry, we get really humid. So, tailoring what you're growing to that, it's definitely a trial and error process.

[01:05:17.23]

Lindy D.: Yeah. And sometimes, something will do wonderful one year, and we're like, "Oh, my gosh, this is so great. We're gonna keep doing this." And the following two years, it doesn't do well.

[01:05:26.23]

Eric V.: 'Cause the conditions aren't—

[01:05:26.25]

Lindy D.: Yeah.

[01:05:27.17]

Michael D.: Yeah.

[01:05:27.17]

Lindy D.: Aren't the same.

[01:05:29.23]

Eric V.: Right.

[01:05:29.28]

Lindy D.: You know, we'll have a super cold winter, or we'll have a—like last year, we had a warm winter. Two years before that, we had an extremely cold winter. So—

[01:05:38.20]

Eric V.: And prolonged.

[01:05:39.16]

Lindy D.: Exactly. Part of the time when we don't do, when we're not as successful, is partly due to my mistakes, because a lot of me picking the seeds and knowing when to start seeds and when to plant seeds, I'm guessing. And I'm making the best educated estimate I can, and I don't always succeed at that. When I do, we have wonderful crops, but sometimes, I misjudge.

[01:06:06.01]

Eric V.: And do you keep notes? I mean, how are you keeping up with that?

[01:06:09.29]

Lindy D.: I keep notes. Lost a buncha notes when we were building our house and farming at the same time, so a lot of it's also just memory.

[01:06:21.24]

Michael D.: In your head.

[01:06:22.15]

Lindy D.: My grandmother, who came from farming background, kept immaculate notes.

Getting back to the climate change, that's one thing—I can look at her notes and see how things are very different to what we're experiencing now.

[01:06:39.02]

Eric V.: In a not very far away area. I mean what, a hundred miles, maybe?

[01:06:42.04]

Michael D.: Mm-hm.

[01:06:42.04]

Lindy D.: Yeah. So . . . you know. It's a lot of trial and error, and just tryin' to see—

[01:06:52.26]

Michael D.: That's why we try to buffer those edges, those extremes. A healthy soil just can take those; can narrow those, or widen your ability to grow in a certain climate. Humidity's kind of a hard thing to control.

[01:07:09.00]

Lindy D.: Especially with lettuces.

[01:07:12.11]

Michael D.: Yeah.

[01:07:11.24]

Eric V.: Expect and pretty well plan on it.

[01:07:14.20]

Michael D.: Yeah, exactly. Plan on it being humid in the summer.

[01:07:19.27]

Eric V.: You mentioned the blueberries and Dol. What else do you grow that might show up in her desserts?

[01:07:28.23]

Lindy D.: We've done edible flowers before, when they've had a catering event where they need something.

[01:07:38.13]

Michael D.: Mint.

[01:07:40.00]

Lindy D.: Mint. Trying to think what else would be in her desserts.

[01:07:43.28]

Michael D.: We've done figs before. We had lost some fig trees, but figs, for sure. We're not really big fruit growers.

[01:07:53.16]

Eric V.: That's what piqued my interest, because it didn't necessarily cross my mind that they would be showing up in any of her desserts.

[01:08:00.27]

Michael D.: Yeah. I know that they get a lot of their stuff from Petals of the Past, does a lot of fruit. Beautiful fruit.

[01:08:07.05]

Lindy D.: Yeah, they're—

[01:08:09.17]

Michael D.: We've been to a couple of their seminars, teaching on how to grow stuff.

[01:08:12.24]

Lindy D.: Yeah, they've got a great fruit setup. The fruit that we've planted is just for us, and when we have overabundance, we'll sell it to the restaurants. But we never intended to be commercial fruit growers.

[01:08:24.16]

Eric V.: That's a whole nother ball of wax.

[01:08:24.16]

Lindy D.: Yeah, it's a whole, yes. I don't think I could handle the anxiety of being a fruit farmer, with the way that our—it used to be that you were always safe, your last frost was going to be April 15 and you weren't going to have a frost till Thanksgiving. We've had frosts in October, and we've had frosts—here in our little microclimate—It didn't register on the state or city as a frost, but we've had a frost at our place on April 28. Now, it was a light frost, and it was just—you know—in the little microclimate we're in, but that changes. That's what I've noticed a difference, from the recollections of my grandmother growing up. You could always, you had some rule of thumb. There's kind of no rule of thumb that much anymore, regarding the weather and how it affects

farming. And then, how that affects us, affects the consistency of telling the chefs what we will definitely have.

[01:09:25.19]

Michael D.: I think they definitely have a better understanding than they did fifteen, ten, fifteen years ago.

[01:09:29.01]

Lindy D.: I think, yeah. I do think you can take that back to Frank and Pardis and their curiosity and sharing of farming with people.

[01:09:39.20]

Michael D.: And now that they have their own place, too, they realize, "Oh, my gosh. That was hard." They show, so much more appreciative—not that they weren't to begin with, but now, they're so much more empathetic. Like, "Oh, I feel for you; we did too, we lost this."

[01:09:54.23]

Lindy D.: I know their son, and maybe their daughter, too, has worked in there.

[01:10:00.17]

Eric V.: Wes still does.

[01:10:01.08]

Lindy D.: Yeah, Paradise Farms. I know that they encourage their employees to go out there. I think that encouragement, coming from owner-head chef down, it helps people like us. We're better understood; we're better appreciated.

[01:10:18.01]

Eric V.: It's part of that educational process, as well.

[01:10:22.09]

Lindy D.: Yeah.

[01:10:22.09]

Eric V.: Do any of the people from the restaurants come out here?

[01:10:24.10]

Michael D.: Yeah. We've had several people come out. It's usually a matter . . . it's a long work week for them, too. Finding that one day that, "Hey, we've got Sunday." And they've got to do everything, and it's our one day we're not delivering.

[01:10:42.27]

Eric V.: They're on a five-day week. You're on a six-day week.

[01:10:44.10]

Michael D.: Yeah. And even seven-day week. There's something we're gonna do every day, usually.

[01:10:51.14]

Lindy D.: People are always welcome to come out. It's more people just don't want to drive 280, they don't want to drive I-20. [U.S. 280 is one of the main commuter routes between downtown Birmingham and its south suburbs, which extend through adjoining Shelby County.] Like Michael said, it's more schedulings. Most of the time, when

people come out, they have a personal curiosity, and they themselves want to make that a priority. But I know that, how many interviews has Frank done over the last few decades? A lot. So, sometimes when Frank has had something to do with some kind of publication or whatnot, he'll bring his chefs with him or whatnot. It's been a long time, because, you know, it used to . . . we—or Michael, rather, I always try to stay in the background—would have media about with him and Frank. But then, because Frank continued to share that with more people, more farmers started cropping up. Now, there's plenty of people to share the spotlight with.

[01:11:57.08]

Eric V.: It gets a little easier on you; you don't have guests showing up all the time when you're trying to work.

[01:12:00.07]

Michael D.: Not that we mind it, but yeah, absolutely. And plus, other people are doing great things.

[01:12:04.04]

Lindy D.: I don't mind guests, I just don't like having my picture made or talking about myself.
[Laughter]

[01:12:09.03]

Eric V.: So here we are. [Laughter]

[01:12:11.00]

Lindy D.: Exactly.

[01:12:13.07]

Eric V.: What are some of the other restaurants where you're regularly supplying?

[01:12:18.09]

Lindy D.: Hot & Hot Fish Club.

[01:12:19.22]

Michael D.: And Ovenbird. Chris Hastings, he used to work for Frank, and is now a James Beard Award winner, has great restaurants. El Barrio and the Woolworth and Paramount.

[01:12:33.22]

Eric V.: So those are former Highlands.

[01:12:35.10]

Michael D.: Former Highlands people. They're great people. Café Dupont was probably our first.

[01:12:43.20]

Lindy D.: Downtown.

[01:12:44.07]

Michael D.: He was the first one that made it downtown. I can remember there not being streetlights at night. He was like, "This is downtown. You don't have streetlights on!"

[01:12:57.18]

Eric V.: And he's another alum, too, Chris Dupont.

[01:13:01.04]

Michael D.: Yeah, he did work there, I believe. Yeah, I didn't know that.

[01:12:57.14]

Lindy D.: I didn't know that.

[01:13:05.16]

Michael D.: Roots & Revelry is downtown. We've been goin' too recently, it's in Thomas Jefferson Tower.

[01:13:12.07]

Eric V.: And another alum, Brandon Cain.

[01:13:14.28]

Lindy D.: Ocean and the Oyster House.

[01:13:15.28]

Michael D.: Yeah, and 26.

[01:13:18.06]

Lindy D.: George Reis. [Interviewer's note: Reis is chef-owner of Ocean and 5 Point Public House and Oyster Bar. Reis' restaurant, 26, occupied the space where the oyster bar is now located before Reis closed 26 in 2015.]

[01:13:18.10]

Michael D.: That are in Southside. Dyron's, that's in Mountain Brook. Randall, that's there now, was a head chef at Bottega—Highlands—for a long time. Let's see.

[01:13:32.23]

Lindy D.: I know we're missing people.

[01:13:32.23]

Michael D.: I know. [Laughter] Mountain Brook Country Club, the Essential, which was Feast & Forest, which is also downtown. [The Essential's co-owner and chef, Victor King, is an alum of both Highlands and Bottega.]

[01:13:41.05]

Lindy D.: Trattoria Centrale— [Interviewer's note: To continue the thread, Trattoria Centrale, and three restaurants mentioned above – Paramount, the Woolworth and El Barrio – were founded by Brian Somersshield and Brian Lockert. Before, Somersshield cooked at Highlands and Chez Fonfon; Lockert worked front-of-the-house at Fonfon.]

[01:13:45.03]

Michael D.: Brick & Tin, which is—

[01:13:48.24]

Lindy D.: And Mauricio [Papapietro; owner of Brick and Tin's two locations] worked for Frank.

[01:13:49.28]

Eric V.: Right. Trattoria got started by Somersshield, I believe?

[01:13:56.16]

Michael D.: Yeah, the same guys that—

[01:13:58.04]

Eric V.: And they later sold it—

[01:13:59.09]

Michael D.: Exactly.

[01:13:59.28]

Eric V.: To employees of theirs.

[01:14:01.15]

Lindy D.: Exactly.

[01:14:03.18]

Michael D.: Yeah, I'm leaving off a bunch of people, aren't I?

[01:14:06.00]

Lindy D.: I know, I feel bad.

[01:14:08.11]

Eric V.: But that kind of ties into what we were talking about a little bit earlier, is that a lot of these connections you've made were from prior connections, and then when they go off and do their thing . . .

[01:14:17.27]

Michael D.: Exactly. Yeah. Like a lot of the chefs that Dupont, Chris Dupont has had, gone off and started working somewhere else. Give us a call from, "Hey, I'm now at here. Can you swing by?"

[01:14:30.12]

Lindy D.: Ollie Irene.

Michael D.: Oh yeah, Ollie Irene –Chris Newsome. [Interviewer's note: Newsome, the chef-co-owner of Ollie Irene in Mountain Brook's Crestline Village, worked at Bottega and Highlands.] He's really good at—whatever you have, he'll take it and do something with it.

[01:14:41.27]

Eric V.: He's one of the more creative chefs I think we have in this city. I'm a big fan of his.

[01:14:46.04]

Michael D.: Yeah. That's why we—I mean, "If you have it, yeah, I'll do something with it. I will make something out of it."

[01:14:53.22]

Lindy D.: We know the chefs from what they're ordering from us, but I could probably count on two hands how many times I've eaten at the restaurants we sell to.

[01:15:03.11]

Eric V.: That was my next question.

[01:15:03.15]

Lindy D.: Yeah. Frank and Pardis—well, one reason we don't go and eat at Frank and Pardis's, besides that's just not really in a farmer's budget, is that if they get any whiff that we're in there, they want to take care of us. And we don't want to take advantage of that relationship. So, they're very generous with wanting to give back to us if we eat at their establishments.

[01:15:27.25]

Michael D.: Usually, it's the second drive back. It's like, I've already driven in once, I don't want to drive in again.

[01:15:31.19]

Lindy D.: Or, I'll have friends that, "Oh, my gosh, you've got to go try this at this restaurant, you know, at Bottega" or some other person's restaurant or whatnot, or Highlands, "This is so good, you've got to go while they've got it, while they're making it." And in the summer, you work a twelve- to sixteen-hour day doing manual labor under the Alabama sun and humidity. You don't have it in you to go get cleaned up, drive back into town which would be more like an hour drive if it's in the evening—

[01:16:03.16]

Michael D.: Yeah, at night.

[01:16:04.11]

Lindy D.: So, a lot of it's just, you know . . .

[01:16:05.12]

Michael D.: That's why I think I pick their brain about eating, or cooking.

[01:16:13.01]

Eric V.: It's pretty much a straight shot up US-280 from your place to theirs, but that is one of the major commuter corridors in this city. So, that could make a good hour-plus day, just in going one way.

[01:16:27.11]

Lindy D.: Yeah. But . . . our friends all eat at the places that we sell to. Have nothing to do with us selling to them, that's just where they eat. So, we do get to hear good things about the chefs and whatnot.

[01:16:41.23]

Eric V.: And do you get feedback on what you've grown that they've eaten?

[01:16:46.13]

Lindy D.: Sometimes.

[01:16:46.13]

Michael D.: Well, you know, if they're our good friends, they've been out here and we've cooked for them. Or we give 'em food.

[01:16:52.04]

Lindy D.: But I will say, getting to the connection you're talking about, going back to a chef-farmer connection, our close friends who have been—we've been sharing our produce with forever, dinner parties, whatnot—are in Decatur, Georgia now. And they can tell the difference in the restaurants in Decatur if someone's using local ingredients, and they will sometimes text us, "Oh, my gosh, we ate at this restaurant, and they've got the little tiny zephyr squash like you grow, and we've never seen them anywhere else!" Or we've

helped them—they can discern between a locally-grown arugula in Georgia and one that's being shipped from a big supplier. That's not our produce, but because their relationship with us, they took that to Decatur, Georgia, that has the same mindset, kind of like Frank and Pardis have, of getting lots of locally-owned produce in the locally-owned restaurants there. But it goes back to, they don't know who that chef or that farmer is that they're eating, but they know that that's happening at that restaurant.

[01:18:02.16]

Eric V.: They can taste it.

[01:18:03.15]

Lindy D.: They can taste it, yeah. And that gets back to what you're saying; you can't really describe—

[01:18:10.01]

Michael D.: A carrot. I can tell you, a carrot is such a big difference between what you buy at your local grocery store and what you pull out of the ground. It's just not the same thing.

[01:18:17.27]

Lindy D.: We know people who insist they don't like carrots or they insist they don't like beets—beets is a big one. But when you have small, locally-grown beets, whether it's ours or any of the other farmers around here doing it, you have it locally, and you have it fresh, and you have it smaller and not oversized and on the refrigerator shelves for a month. It's gonna taste like—so, we've converted quite a few beet-eaters and carrot-eaters that didn't think they liked those vegetables beforehand.

[01:18:50.06]

Eric V.: Yeah, that seems to be the big thing these days in food, is beets. Even into the mock meat now.

[01:18:58.15]

Lindy D.: Yeah.

[01:18:58.15]

Michael D.: Yeah, mm-hm. Best veggie burger you've had was beets, wasn't it?

[01:19:00.24]

Lindy D.: Um-hm.

[01:19:04.10]

Eric V.: What kind of interactions do you have with Pardis?

[01:19:07.06]

Michael D.: I see her quite often, actually.

[01:19:11.10]

Lindy D.: You see her more frequently than Frank.

[01:19:13.14]

Michael D.: Yeah, in the office. [Interviewer's note: Pardis' office is upstairs at Bottega.

Although he has a small desk at Bottega, Chef Stitt's office is upstairs at Highlands.] We just—she was my manager for a while, when I waited tables there. I can tell you that . . . she's just incredible with people. She knows people, she remembers people, she's honestly . . . interested in what you have to say. And then we see her at dinner parties

and stuff for mutual friends. And they're just, they're just incredibly nice, especially to us. They've kind of taken us in, I feel like.

[01:19:50.01]

Lindy D.: Yeah.

[01:19:51.17]

Eric V.: So, what am I missing here? What else do people need to know about the relationship with Highlands and, just in general, being a niche farmer in a restaurant city?

[01:20:04.21]

Michael D.: What are people missing, Lindy?

[01:20:08.28]

Lindy D.: I mean—

[01:20:09.00]

Michael D.: It's not always sunny and beautiful outside, and that sometimes—like everybody's job, nobody's job's perfect, besides Anthony Bourdain's, and even, it apparently wasn't perfect . . . so, there's ups and downs, just like anybody's jobs. It's not always fun to go out in the cold or the super-hot, but for the most part, I love watching the birds, listening to the sounds of what's going on, seeing what's happening on a daily basis, trying new things.

[01:20:41.13]

Eric V.: It's what attracted you to this profession in the first place.

[01:20:46.13]

Michael D.: Yeah. We recently started having bees out here, that's a new interest of ours.

[01:20:52.10]

Eric V.: What got you started on that?

[01:20:53.07]

Lindy D.: Well, that kind of came through Frank, in a roundabout way, too. We had always wanted to have honeybees, and just never could find the time to take the classes through the extension [service] in Shelby County.

[01:21:08.01]

Michael D.: Yeah, we realized it's not just pick up some bees and start doing 'em. [Laughter]

[01:21:13.21]

Lindy D.: Yeah. It's an expensive hobby or profession to have, as well. There's a lot of expense in apiaries, whether it's small or commercial.

[01:21:23.11]

Eric V.: In buying the—

[01:21:24.06]

Lindy D.: The equipment, the bees themselves. And, like Michael mentioned earlier, Frank and Prince Warnock both have a good friend, Ben Johnson, who they're in the wine—

[01:21:43.07]

Michael D.: Club.

[01:21:43.07]

Lindy D.: Tasting club, and at a joint party, Ben found out we were interested in bees. He was looking for someone to have a mentor-like relationship with, someone who could help him, when it's more than a one-person job but who he could impart his wisdom and knowledge on. So, between Frank and Prince, Ben got introduced to us, and Ben took us under his wing. He's been kind of mentoring us on our bees. But Ben, who's been teaching Frank's son [Wesley] to take care of the bees out at his farm, Paradise Farms, before he had moved back home, Ben took care of Frank's hives. So, we started to learn about our hives from helping Ben do Frank's hives. So, we would be going out to Frank's farm at Paradise Farms and helping . . . take care of them. Now we have our own.

[01:22:44.01]

Michael D.: Think we've graduated to the point where he doesn't have to constantly come out and tell us what's going on now.

[01:22:48.17]

Eric V.: And why are you raising the bees?

[01:22:50.15]

Lindy D.: For a couple reasons. One, they supposedly help with pollination. And we have noticed a decline in the bee population from when I got into it, back in 2002, to now. You don't see as many . . .

[01:23:08.17]

Michael D.: Honey bees.

[01:23:09.01]

Lindy D.: Or even bumble bees, for that matter.

[01:23:09.01]

Michael D.: Yeah.

[01:23:09.18]

Lindy D.: Two, of course, we like the honey. Three, worldwide, the bee population's been declining, and people want people to support bees. This is our way of helping to support the microclimate of having bees.

[01:23:30.12]

Michael D.: I find them fascinating, too. There's so much that we don't know about 'em. They're an incredible animal. I would say an insect, but I think they're actually classified as animals in the U.S.D.A. registry, actually, pretty sure. Bizarre, huh?

[01:23:50.08]

Eric V.: Interesting. You mentioned to me earlier, before we turned on the microphone, about the life cycle of the queen.

[01:23:58.11]

Michael D.: Oh, yeah. The queen. We've lost several queens. Is it thirty-five dollars to have a queen shipped to you overnight?

[01:24:08.28]

Lindy D.: It's fifty.

[01:24:10.18]

Michael D.: So, we've taken to learn how to . . . instigate them to raise a new queen on their own. Through the help of Ben. So, that's been an interesting process, of taking a little, tiny brood and instigating the rest of the nurse bees to make a queen out of them.

[01:24:32.12]

Eric V.: And how do they do that?

[01:24:34.19]

Michael D.: They take a larva—you have to be queenless first; they realize they're queenless—and they feed royal jelly for the entire duration of the larva's life. And other bee breads and pollens, and they basically raise a queen. They'll raise, probably, several, just to make sure that one lives. When that queen emerges, she will immediately go and kill all the rest of the other queens, and then take off and fly in the air to go—I'm gonna get that wrong—very high in the air. And the highest drone flying, that's who she'll mate with, the male. Whatever drone can fly the highest, that's who she'll mate with. Then she'll come back to that place and that's their new queen.

[01:25:20.14]

Lindy D.: And she stays in the hive the rest of her life. She never leaves.

[01:25:24.07]

Michael D.: Never leaves. Unless they swarm.

[01:25:27.14]

Lindy D.: Yeah. The only reason they would leave is if they outgrow their hive. They will swarm, which means they leave to go find somewhere else with more room.

[01:25:36.19]

Michael D.: And then the rest of the bees will be like, "Oh, we're queenless, let's raise a new queen."

[01:25:40.23]

Eric V.: Now the queen suffers a fate, too, from what you were saying.

[01:25:45.19]

Michael D.: Yeah. If a queen is judged by the rest of the colony to be weak, injured, not laying very well, they will kill her and begin the process of raising another one.

[01:25:57.14]

Lindy D.: A true democracy. [Laughter]

[01:26:00.20]

Michael D.: And even the beekeeper. If you talk to five beekeepers, you'll get five different answers about what to do. There's been some suggestion that you want to kill the queen every two years and raise a new one.

[01:26:16.15]

Eric V.: For the health of the colony?

[01:26:18.20]

Michael D.: Health of the colony, that—

[01:26:20.10]

Lindy D.: Well, and like our mentor, Ben Johnson, he'll kill a queen if she's just too mean.

[01:26:25.03]

Michael D.: Yeah.

[01:26:25.03]

Lindy D.: Because he wants to promote calm hives, which . . . is a good thing for many reasons, not just the bee keeper.

[01:26:35.22]

Eric V.: Less smoke involved when you're dealing with them.

[01:26:37.09]

Michael D.: And it is a thing. Just the two that we have, you can go and tell a huge difference between one and the other, about how angry they are. And so, we're trying to breed for genetics; we want one that's a good layer, we want one that's gentle.

[01:26:54.10]

Lindy D.: That's Varroa mite-resistant.

[01:26:54.28]

Michael D.: Resistant. The Varroa mite is the biggest scourge of the bee nowadays, it's a little mite that lays inside the larva's cell and then will attach itself to the bee and create deformed wing virus, among other things. They're devastating. So, we're trying to raise, they're called V.H.S., Varroa Hygiene Sensitive bees, where they will either attack the

varroa mite or they just have behaviors that either kill or discourage the varroa mite. So, that's what we're also trying to raise when we're raising these queens, is just improve the genetics.

[01:27:40.13]

Eric V.: How do you harvest the honey?

[01:27:43.06]

Michael D.: One time a year, usually in August—actually, people can do it at, this is the way we particularly do it, there's many ways to do it—in August, we will inspect the frames and inspect the hive. You want to leave about, usually, sixty pounds of honey in the hive for them to live on during the winter.

[01:28:05.28]

Eric V.: 'Cause that's their food.

[01:28:07.16]

Michael D.: That's their food. That's what they're gonna live on. Like right now, it's thirty degrees outside, and the queen is in the middle and every bee is around her, surrounding her, vibrating, making heat. That's their entire job in the entire winter. That's all they do. So, we'll leave about sixty pounds in. We'll take the excess. You have a hot knife and you scrape off the wax capping, take that and put it in a centrifuge, spin it, and then that pours out through a—we screen ours, takes out, and those different-size screens so you can gauge how much pollen grains you want to leave in or out; each pollen grain has a different size, so depending on how clear or how much pollen you want in, you can choose your screen, and I let it out from there. We usually, since I've been doing this

with Ben, it'll be his hives, my hives, and Frank's hives, and we'll do all three of ours together. We keep 'em separate, but we do 'em all at the same time.

[01:29:12.11]

Eric V.: How many hives do you have?

[01:29:16.01]

Michael D.: I have two. Ben will have anywhere between four and nine. And Frank has a couple.

[01:29:23.06]

Eric V.: So, you're leaving sixty [pounds] behind in your hives. Is it like each, each hive?

[01:29:27.28]

Michael D.: Yeah, each hive is going to have sixty.

[01:29:28.01]

Eric V.: So, how much more honey are you able to harvest, about that sixty you keep behind?

[01:29:35.23]

Michael D.: This year, I believe we got seven pounds. This is only our second year to do it. So, Ben got substantially more; had an older hive that, he'd already had, the frames were already drawn out, so that's a lot of energy that the bees had spent—for us, having to draw out the frames to make to where they could store it. Once you're, every year, they're a little bit more ready to start harvesting and collecting honey. Now, we're at that point now. What was interesting is the difference in flavor of the honeys that we were tasting at the end. And our honey was delicious. Our first year that we did it, to make

sure that our hive survived, we fed them sugar water. We wanted to make sure that they were gonna have enough energy to do everything they needed to build out. That year, the honey tasted good, but you could tell it was made from sugar water.

[01:30:38.13]

Eric V.: It was a dilute.

[01:30:38.15]

Michael D.: Yeah. And this year, it was just substantially better, because every bit of the honey came from flowers that were around here.

[01:30:48.22]

Lindy D.: But funny enough, the best honey I've ever had—and I've had lots of small, boutique honeys that people have brought us from their travels, where they go to different clover farms or—

[01:31:01.07]

Michael D.: Tupelo farms.

[01:31:01.14]

Lindy D.: Tupelo farms or whatnot. But the best honey I've ever had is actually Paradise Farms' honey.

[01:31:06.14]

Eric V.: What do you think made it so good?

[01:31:08.18]

Lindy D.: I think the fact that Frank and Pardis have quite a few different plantings. But I also think because they're near a water source. But that's what I've kind of caught on from hearing our mentor talk.

[01:31:27.02]

Eric V.: What role does a water source play?

[01:31:27.24]

Michael D.: Well . . . I think there's also a lot of tree diversity that's around there. I think there's a lot more plant diversity. I was telling you about our place, we're largely a pine stand here, and there's a lot of cotton fields or just sod fields. And there's some out there, too, by Frank's, as well. I just think he has a more richness, diversity that they're pulling from. I don't know what makes something flavorful. I just know when we tried all three of 'em, it was like, "That is distinctly better, and you live ten miles away from me."
[Laughter]

[01:32:03.02]

Lindy D.: And it is every year. I mean—

[01:32:06.27]

Eric V.: It's consistently that way.

[01:32:07.12]

Lindy D.: Yes, mm-hm.

[01:32:08.28]

Eric V.: So do you have—it seems like a lot of your background has been aided by mentors.

[01:32:16.21]

Michael D.: Yeah.

[01:32:18.04]

Eric V.: Who do you mentor to?

[01:32:21.01]

Michael D.: No one yet, I don't think. We're not a mentor to anyone, are we? We're more like a mentor just to our friends that are interested in it, and that wouldn't know about food.

[01:32:36.18]

Lindy D.: Well, the way we farm and where we farm is, we're fairly isolated. Especially for me. Michael does the deliveries, so he sees people every day. I can go a month or a couple months without seeing anyone, or if I do, it's my family. We don't have children.

[01:32:58.03]

Michael D.: We're not near a college campus, I think is a big thing. I feel like the people in Tuscaloosa, they get a lot of interest from the college, young adults about to make their way out. A lot of different interests.

[01:33:10.20]

Lindy D.: Yeah. And we can't find workers, either.

[01:33:12.13]

Eric V.: Yeah, I grew up in Georgia. It was a similar thing around U.G.A. [University of Georgia at Athens.]

[01:33:14.20]

Lindy D.: Yeah. We've had people who are in high school or college that are interested and want to volunteer for personal, just to see if it's something they're interested in, but they don't want to come as far away as we are. So, that's where Jones Valley works well for them, or like you're talkin' about Tuscaloosa, the farms around there. [Interviewer's note: The Tuscaloosa County farms include Stitt suppliers Snow's Bend and Belle Meadow.] We're just kind of more isolated, so there's not many people we have in our life, other than our friends or family.

[01:33:48.02]

Eric V.: The Tuscaloosa County ones, they're probably just as far away from the campus but a lot easier to get to than Birmingham.

[01:33:55.27]

Michael D.: Yeah.

[01:33:55.27]

Lindy D.: Exactly.

[01:33:55.27]

Eric V.: All right. Well, listen, I do appreciate you taking the time with us today and sharing your knowledge.

[01:34:00.10]

Michael D.: I appreciate your interest.

[01:34:01.17]

Eric V.: Sharing your story.

[01:34:01.26]

Lindy D.: Thank you.

[01:34:02.28]

Eric V.: We're gonna take thirty seconds now to let the tape run out.

[End of interview]